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A Hint and The Incapacity

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A HINT AND THE INCAPACITY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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ABSTRACT

A HINT & THE INCAPACITY

By Jake Anthony Reller, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Major Director: Javier Tapia, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

My paintings are a mediated autobiography focusing on fragmented, cropped or collaged elements derived from photographic sources. Banal scenes based on my experience growing up in rural Washington state are charged with multivalent interpretations via close ups, veiling and intentional obfuscation. Through these means, altered color and expressionistic paint handling, they subtly point outside of their beginnings as the photographic and personal and into a dialogue with historical and social sites such as punk music, abstract expressionism and existential literature.

RED BROWN

In my work the subject recedes into the paint. The work begins with a photographic source; either cropped or collaged, becoming subsumed, reinterpreted and represented by paint in order to operate as various metaphors of failure, repression, trauma, biography and loss. These metaphors are expressed through images suggesting celebration, play, and the familiar. Images of sports, family, and holidays are dislocated through color, paint handling, composition and disjunction. They mine certain histories of discontent: baroque painting, abstract expressionism, hardcore punk, heavy metal and literary works about what Kurt Vonnegut Jr. calls, “a bummer it is to be a human being.”¹

I grew up in Walla Walla, Washington, in the county really, a desert. My nearest neighbor was a farmer named Red Brown whom I bucked bales for during harvest. The house I was raised in had false wood panel walls, a deep umber. Every other year we burned the fields. They became the surface of hell, charred wastelands with tracts of glowing coals. Once, I witnessed, at night, a jet black steer with pronounced horns walk through a bed of embers, lay down next to it, basically on it, and the smell of burning hair and flesh rose into the darkness. A deep red illuminated his body and horns and he had the look of a wise demon in his eyes: full of hell. He stayed there for over an hour, self-immolating.

An occult red, a black where the face of evil has reared its bloody horned head, brown (which I despise) and a green of unknown intent, deep, mixed with red, sap,

¹ Vonnegut, Kurt., and Simon, Daniel. *A Man without a Country*. Seven Stories Press 1st ed. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005, 15.

pthalo or viridian: they conspire in the work. In my paintings color is used this way, to make a mall Santa a serial killer, a wrestling hero a false idol, or a bowling ball a victim. In *Yardsale*, the umber of the paneled walls that I grew up in evokes a psychological space, as dank and grimy as Josef Fritz's basement.



My father worked at the pulp and paper mill in Walla Walla. It smelled of sulfur, the odor hell is rumored to have. On rare, infernal occasions, the wind would shift and the smells of the nearby slaughterhouse and the pulp mill would combine. This combination affected me deeply, and left me with an affinity for the work of artists who used collage subtly and enigmatically, artists like Edwin Dickinson, Max Ernst, or John Stezaker. Dickinson's paintings are monochromatic, enigmatic and have strange points

of view that disjoint the viewer. In Stezaker's collage work, disjunctive imagery is synthesized by formal rhyming or color. Both artist's achieve a kind of subtle enigma in my mind, a logical ambiguity, that I am very interested in.

In Dickinson's *The Fossil Hunters* a woman occupies the center of the monochromatic painting, viewed from above. The painting has actually been hung upside down or sideways in a number of shows. There is a quiet richness to the kinds of painterly languages Dickinson is using. The flat cloth in the corner is like a woodcut or a high contrast photo, yet it is next to another cloth that appears to be painted from life.

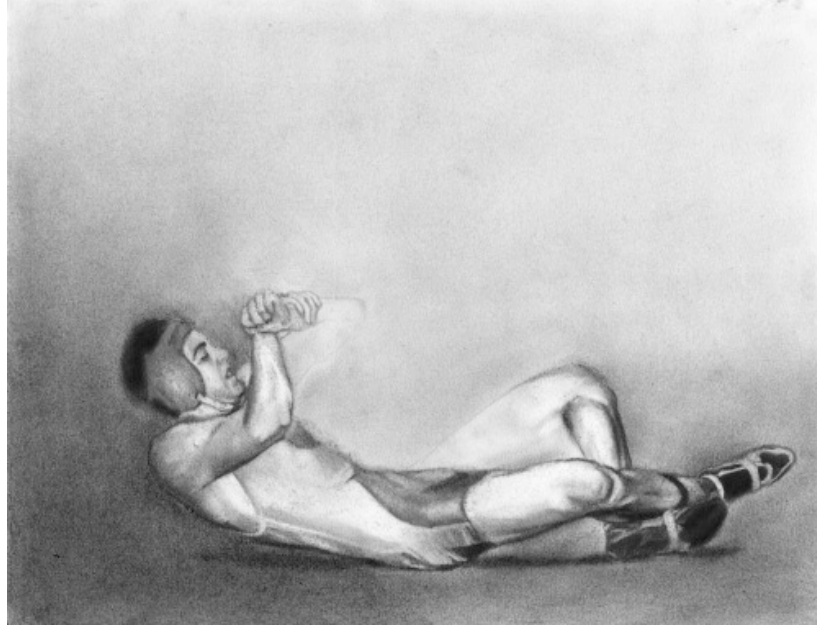




My only exposure to art growing up, save for watercolors of tractors, were black and white reproductions in books from the 80s and 90s at my high school library. This left a profound effect on me, as I accessed art only through photographs. For me, these reproductions, high contrast and flattened through poor means of printing, bore a striking resemblance to the album covers and photos of punk, metal and hardcore bands like Minor Threat, Burzum, or Slint.

I lived with a hardcore punk band for five years, even serving as their roadie for a tour of the southwest, and we talked about nothing but aggressive or extreme music for the duration of our time together. Ribera, Goya, Bellows and Caravaggio's dramatic figures resembled the mayhem of a punk show and, conversely, a shirtless, tattooed, fat guy stagediving onto an unsuspecting crowd revealed the kind of sensitivity implicit in a painting of Saint Andrew.





The time I spent in the strange, white, machismo world of hardcore punk imparted on me a fascination with the gestures of its participants. People slam dance, mosh, pile on, stage dive, whatever you want to call it. Caravaggio and the Circle Jerks never seemed that unrelated to me in terms of how the male body was represented and even acted in certain situations. High school wrestling has many of the same gestures. Each wrestler in a series of drawings and paintings that I made is losing against an unforeseen opponent. Jacob, the biblical character who wrestles with God in the Old Testament, seemed to me an interesting stand in for these ideas, the reluctant patriarch who wrestles with an unseen force. He loses.

GREEN RIVER

The black and white cover of Burzum's 1992 album *Aske*, shows a burnt out church against a nondescript forest. Although the contrast is high, the lightest value is still grey. In my piece *Hliðskjálf*, a forest in Washington is painted with close middle grey values. *That's where they paint the houses* uses the same approach, a home in the forest, although all its values are closer to white. *That's where they paint the houses* gets its title from song by Slint, a little known band from the 90's who inspired a whole breed of drone-y, atmospheric and noisy rock. Their music is a wasteland, a desert in tone. My paintings strive for this effect, to be non-discursive, affecting the viewer with atmosphere as opposed to a literal read. Halfway through their jangly, oddly tempoed song *Kent* Brian McMahan of Slint halfheartedly mutters the five minute songs' only lyrics:

Don't worry about me
I've got a bed
I've got a Christmas tree
Inside my head²

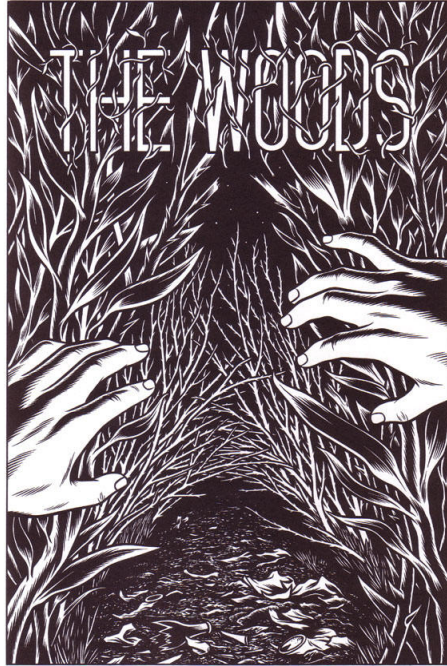
The lyrics and instrumentation are simple yet strangely unclear. It is prosaic for the first two or three lines and suddenly turns at the last moment into the poetic, unnerving even. One cannot tell the emotional state of the author. Is this a kind of repression? Is he actually happy? There is a fogginess to both the sonic qualities of the music and its accompanying lyrical content. It is murky, obscure, and thick. I am interested in paintings that operate in the same way. How does one make a dense painting? A

² *Kent*. Slint. Jennifer Hartman Records, 1989, compact disc.

painting that feels like the smog of a paper mill, the distorted guitars of the Melvins, the thick smell of a slaughterhouse?



Later, I moved to western Washington, where it rains frequently and the foliage is pines, spruce and sword ferns. The Pacific Northwest fascinates me. There is a rain forest there. Horror films are shot there. The Shining and Twin Peaks were filmed there. Raymond Carver and Charles Burns cut their teeth in Washington.



Between each damp tree there is an ominous, fucked up space for the unknown. Rimbaud is there, the Tetragrammaton is there, the Green River Killer, Ted Bundy, and Robert Lee Yates are all there. My mother worked at the maximum-security prison where Gary Ridgway, the green river killer, a man who killed nearly 100 people, was detained. I went to school with his son. Those trees are capable of green and madness.



ZINC WHITE MUFF

In Roland Barthes' essay *Sade, Fourier and Loyola*, the writer identifies what Lacan calls "instances,"³ incidental, isolated, and even quiet moments that are of great importance in the lives of the authors he is commenting on. The essay focuses on the sexual libertine the Marquis de Sade, the pious Ignatius of Loyola and the utopian philosopher, Charles Fourier. Barthes' does not views Sade, Fourier and Loyola as a deviant criminal, hermetic theologian or radical socialist respectively, but as writers who transcend their subject in favor of their medium and the ecstasy of the act. Rather than their historical or political placement, he identifies "biographemes,"⁴ subtle, fractured, even banal incidentals as entry points into their lives:

"...Were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to "biographemes" whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion; a marked life, in sum, as Proust succeeded in writing his in his work, or even a film, in the old style, in which there is no dialogue and the flow of images (that flumen orationis which perhaps is what makes up the "obscenities" of writing) is intercut, like the relief of hiccoughs, by the barely written darkness of the intertitles, the casual eruption of another signifier: Sade's white muff, Fourier's flowerpots, Ignatius's Spanish eyes."⁵

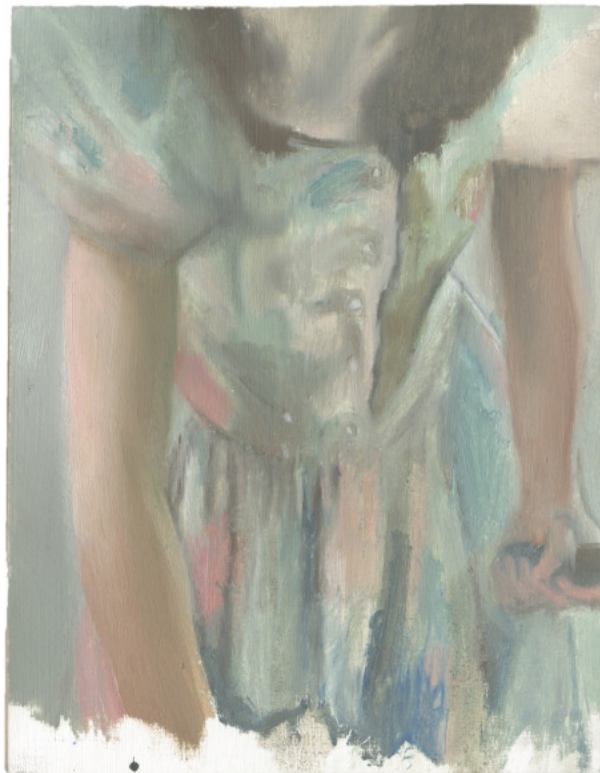
The quiet moments of each of these figures lives take on a greater meaning than the bulk of their whole oeuvre, or rather they are kernels that hold a density and depth of meaning that supersedes the thousands of pages they collectively wrote. The muff, flowerpots and eyes erupt, overwhelm and overflow with tears—joyous, tragic and

³ Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976, 6.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

rageful, simultaneously. Reduction of the image, cropping and fragmentation operate in this way in a painting such as *Bookburner*. A young woman of indiscriminate age wears a pale and washed out dress and clutches an unidentifiable object with her left hand. Her intentions and life are unknown, reduced only to a fleeting, and insubstantial millisecond. Does she clutch a knife? A bike handle? A cock? It refuses to be unraveled, the image hiccups between horror (of say *Carrie*), the quotidian and the erotic. The colors are washed out, muddied and mixed with a substantial amount of semi-transparent zinc white. The painting is tiny, as large as a sheet of printer paper. The lower section of the composition has no paint, only the underlying gesso and a single drip. This “unfinished” quality and its dispersed meaning points towards the ecstasy of its making; its color, value and saturation like a memory or vague recollection.



Mark Rothko spoke of the dispersion and multivalence of meaning in his own work saying, “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom...”⁶ Rothko’s writing speaks to the spectral nature of his radiant paintings saying, “pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.”⁷ Rothko’s vocabulary is markedly Judeo-Christian in tone. Words like miracle, creation and eternal recall the language of a prophet preaching the gospel.

Where then does Rothko place himself as the artist? Rothko almost grandiosely declares for there to be light in his paintings like the creation myth of Genesis. Is the creation akin to the first man, who rebels against his creator, or like the Apostle Paul who denies Christ three times before the dawn? The veil-like nature of his paintings even points to the idea of the revelation, the thing behind the thing, the preaching of Christ, the apocalyptic prophet who speaks of the end of times. This idea of revelation, of veils of meaning, secret and apocryphal, informs how the edges of my paintings are often treated. As in Rothko’s painting *Ochre and Red on Red*, the underlying layers of previous paintings peer through, a pentimento, a palimpsest, which alludes to arcane knowledge, like the shemhamphorash, the secret and unutterable name of God. In *That’s Where They Paint the Houses* the veil is fog, the fog of my home, and it pushes

⁶ Alloway, Lawrence. *Topics in American Art since 1945*. 1st ed. New York: Norton, 1975, 315

⁷ Rothko, Mark, and López-Remiro, Miguel. *Writings on Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 119.

the original information to obscurity. In *Bookburner* the edge reveals absence, the lack of a previous layer underneath the painting save for the preparatory gesso.

Rothko is not shy in admitting the connections of his work to creation myths: "if our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas."⁸ Whether or not the Judeo-Christian myths can speak to all of humanity's experience is debatable, but Rothko truly believed his work framed in this context had such an ability. However, Rothko again and again does not necessarily assert divinity, no matter how high an opinion he had of himself or his work, but of humanity. Alloway writes, "If it is not evident from the art, though I believe it is, there is ample verbal evidence in the written and recorded statements of the artists of their conviction that art was a projection of their humanity."⁹

⁸ Rothko, Mark, and Rothko, Christopher. *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004, 98.

⁹ Alloway, Lawrence. *Topics in American Art since 1945*. 1st ed. New York: Norton, 1975, 316



In the Old Testament, Job is a righteous man of God, blessed with a large family, wealth and happiness. God allows Satan to test his piety by stripping him bare of these gifts. Job falters but never renounces his faith. Like Abraham, Job is a Kierkegaardian

figure, suffering, tragic and yet ecstatic, not unlike Sade, Fourier and Loyola. Rothko's abstraction comes in the forms of paradoxes, they must have multiple valences in order to achieve the emotional atmosphere he is after. He states, "any shape or area which has not the pulsating concreteness of real flesh and bones, its vulnerability to pleasure or pain is nothing at all. Any picture which does not provide the environment in which the breath of life can be drawn does not interest me."¹⁰ The contradicting joy and suffering of the narrative of Job is embodied in journey of Rothko in his studio. Ecstasy and spiritual transcendence require denial and contradiction. He must have humanity, with all its paradoxes, this is why he refuses the label of an abstractionist. The pain and pleasure held in tension in his paintings are very real to him. If you cut them they bleed. Near the end of the book Job speaks with God saying, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."¹¹ Rothko in *Ochre and Red on Red* experiences things too wonderful for him to know, alienating him from his own paintings upon their completion, making him an outsider, enacting the roles of Johannes de Silentio in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, or Job and Abraham in the Old Testament. It is only through this paradoxical disconnect that the paintings truly become revelations of the numinous, the breath of unrepresentable knowledge.

¹⁰ Rothko, Mark, and Rothko, Christopher. *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004, 112.

¹¹ The Holy Bible : New International Version, Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978, Job 42:3.

DARK ENTRIES

Philip Guston's paintings from the late 1960s were met with a rabid backlash from his contemporaries when they strayed out of the self-reflexive borders Clement Greenberg had delineated in his powerful essay "Modernist Art." Greenberg notes that, "three dimensionality is the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture."¹² Guston's paintings, eschewing Greenberg's purity by their inclusion of narrative or figurative elements are seen as representations first and pictures second, because they were complicit with other forms of art, kitsch comics, news media, or sculpture.

In my painting, *Catch*, a man in hip waders stands knee high in a lake holding up a large fish, rendered as a large slash of pink. There is a sinister undertone in the man's gesture. Is this a trap? A temptation from an untrustworthy figure? The realism of the figure begins to unravel the closer to the top of the canvas it gets, finally breaking down almost completely into areas that have been smeared in and out with paint, rags or solvents. The smears and muddy colors run together resembling the work of the action painters, perhaps Joan Mitchell or early Philip Guston, in marks or process. In his essay, "American Action Painting," Harold Rosenberg describes the American vanguard not in terms of flatness or the purity of formal elements, but rather as "events,"¹³ and that "a painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a 'moment' in the unadulterated mixture of his life,"¹⁴ So there are places, small glimmers to be sure, in the moments in *Catch* where the picture breaks down, where an

¹² Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture; Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 776.

¹³ Rosenberg, Harold. *The Tradition of the New*. 1st McGraw-Hill Pbk. Ed.]. ed. McGraw-Hill Paperbacks. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, 589.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 590.

autobiographical event has occurred, a recording of presence. Rosenberg noted the private experiential nature of painting and how it creates something profoundly interior and metaphysical, “based on the phenomenon of conversion the new movement is, with the majority of the painters, essentially a religious movement. In almost every case, however, the conversion has been experienced in secular terms. The result has been the creation of private myths.”¹⁵ In making *Catch*, I remember a manic, even choleric sense of discovery or myth making: pulling the image inward, it oscillating between profound meaning and senselessness, flatness becoming expansive, vice versa. Fishing, paradoxically, became both the center and beside the point, the sport peripheral to the meaning, which was and is completely inscrutable, but glimmering in the water.

¹⁵ Ibid., 591.



In my painting, *Yardsale*, an image of a house under construction and the interior of a cabin from the turn of the century are butted up against each other. A collage I made serves as a reference. Strange drapery, a bear trap, a portico, a stove, sawhorses, a floating red door, through the violent marks, erasure and layers of paint that haunt the scene, become metaphoric conduits for a plethora of meaning I did not intend or set out to identify. There was an impetus, a potential in the original photograph that through the act of painting I sought to understand. If in *Catch* I set out to coax meaning from the image, in *Yardsale* I collided meaning, placing two distinct polarities at odds, if only to see what would happen. Associations of the domestic and historic,

interior and exterior are conflated. Becoming congruent, they vibrate against one another, and it is perhaps more of an interior psychological space than a true diagram of reality.

Ultimately, by both Rosenberg and Greenberg's conception of painting, my work couldn't be farther from reality. Impure, they are in a secret pact with a dark chemical being—photography. Is Walter Benjamin's sensitive observation of the prevailing discussion of the "dispute as to the artistic value of painting versus photography,"¹⁶ this long running "rivalry,"¹⁷ a productive frame to consider painting and photography through? A friend once told me my paintings were perhaps problematic because they were sincere paintings made with insincere means. Criticism like this feels like a double-edged sword, I agree and disagree simultaneously. I think about Vermeer using a *camera obscura* or Thomas Eakins a magic lantern. Francis Bacon painted Velazquez from a reproduction. Can there be a syncretic, egalitarian space in which both may exist? Perhaps the one of the most sincere painters I can think of is Peter Doig, who uses photographs as his starting points. Stephen Westfall on Luc Tuymans writes, "to consider Tuyman's work, readers soon realize, is to consider the problem of contemporary painting in general: its relation to photography and electronic imagery, its commodity status, how it transforms what it represents and what it can represent at all."¹⁸ I think have never fully understood this dilemma. Why is painting so bound up in such a masochistic dialectic? I think about other forms of creative expression, such as music. Is an instrument a representation of the human voice? Is an electric one a

¹⁶ Harrison, Charles, and Wood, Paul. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003, 522.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 522.

¹⁸ Westfall, Stephen. "Art In America." *Painting the Unseen*. September 30, 2004.

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/painting-the-unseen/>.

representation of that? The synthesizer, the electric guitar, are generations from their ancestors, but Kraftwerk or Minor Threat remapped the cultural landscape with them. My paintings are not reality in the slightest, it is not a real fisherman, not even a person looking at a fisherman: it is a person looking at an image—being possessed by it, attempting to possess it, and grasping to understand their relationship to it.

Stephen Westfall writes, “every form of memory, every capacity of imagination is ultimately determined by reality, not the other way around.”¹⁹ Although one could argue the opposite quite convincingly (i.e. alien abduction accounts often bear a strong resemblance to Science Fiction precedents) this binary of the real world and the imaginative inner life is rich ground, and was identified quite profoundly in Roger Fry’s work *An Essay in Aesthetics*. Expressing the unique qualities of the imaginative life he writes, “the motives we actually experience are too close to us to enable us to feel them clearly...In the imaginative life, on the contrary, we can both feel the emotion and watch it.”²⁰ *Yardsale* and *Catch* are made from and at a distance to reality, via a photographic source, serving as a way to contemplate the images for their potentialities, limitations, as well as my autobiographical relationship to them. I’ve been thinking the work might be phantasms, projections of the past, but ultimately immaterial, in the sense that, they do not exist. Illusions are that which are not—mirages, hallucinations, fever dreams, apparitions—representation and magic are both defined by artifice.

Discussing Gregory Crewdson’s photographs, more Spielberg than Stella, Johanna Drucker writes:

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Harrison, Charles, and Wood, Paul. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003, 78.

“Crewdson reinvests these images-from-images with the exquisite specialness of dreams. Painters of another generation might have yearned for an absolute of pure representation, self-sufficient and self-evident abstraction. Earlier yet, they may have struggled for true perception of a person or thing, making it into a transparent image. Crewdson draws on images as the original object of inspiration—he isn't representing life, love, religious passions, nature, spiritual belief or any thing at all except images.”²¹

Images become like a mirror world where a kaleidoscope of new making is possible through fragmentation and reflection, and, in actuality, the redoubled vastness is an illusory flatness. Both producer and consumer can delight in the carnival, tacitly acknowledging art's reflexivity is more like a house of mirrors than a home. The exponential image defies the autonomous purity of Greenberg's sublimating alchemy, assimilating it like the extraterrestrial polymorph in John Carpenter's 1979 *film The Thing*, multivalent but whose intentions, whether in good faith or bad faith, sincere or insincere, is up for grabs.

Like Crewdson, my paintings are images of images, painted from photographs I have taken, found or manipulated. Often, the images seem almost necessary to be painted, to be internalized through the body, reclaimed or remade, as perhaps a way to grapple with the strange oversaturated world I have inherited. Louis Althusser in describing how the Ideological State Apparatus works through the invisible and self-evident mechanism of interpellation writes that, “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of

²¹ Drucker, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams : Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2005, 7.

‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.”²² Human beings are made of ideologies as much as we construct them, and in a similar way, my work is made of images as much as I make and are constituted by them. If the cascade of images we experience through social media, billboards, film, and advertising cause the kind of distracted acceptance of various ISA’s, could Roger Fry’s notion of the “disinterested intensity of contemplation,”²³ lead to a better understanding of how interpellated by the ideology of images I actually am. In my studio practice I am always forced to grapple with the question: Is painting the symptom, the photograph, really a path to access such contemplation?

There is an uncanny similarity modernist painting under the hyper-specialized prescription of Greenberg bears to Karl Marx’s notion of alienation. English Scholar Peter Barry writes, “The result of this exploitation is alienation, which is the state which comes about when a worker is ‘deskilled’ and made to perform fragmented, repetitive tasks in a sequence of whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp.”²⁴ Could it be possible that by defining what art is in such limited parameters that the modernist artist became as much a part of the ideological constructs of capitalism as the factory worker screwing the same screw into the same microwave eight hours a day five days a week? Deskilled, making the same drip paintings one after another, and serious doubts flowing in and out of them, Jackson Pollock nearly gave up painting, and ultimately his life. Could Greenberg have been just as interpellated with master

²² Harrison, Charles, and Wood, Paul. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003, 960.

²³ *Ibid.*, 79

²⁴ Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory : An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. *Beginnings* (Manchester, England). Manchester, UK ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed in the U.S. by Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 151

narratives (Western and Judeo-Christian) of pure/impure, moral/immoral, good/bad, as the peasants gazing at Repin's social realism. Perhaps at times I feel this, and to make the photomechanical reproduction of the photograph into a painted object is a kind of personal reification.

Painting is like a phantom limb at times. It is felt, incredibly deeply, but there is a tingling in the air, as if it was lost long ago, or no longer operates. Greenberg did a rather strange thing in his seminal essay, setting up a spatial diagram of forms of art production and placing various artists into various camps, or, his term, "provinces."²⁵ This clear marking of territories of art makes the free navigation of ideas difficult, as Greenberg erected theoretical fences, describing all the levels of heaven and hell, estranging artists from alternative areas of creativity. There are no graven images in Greenberg's tablets, leaving the votaries of certain old gods in the strange temples of their conquerors, their house deities becoming demons of the new order. Defeated, the philistine Baals of various aesthetic pantheons are transmuted into Beelzebubs of anesthetic institutions.

Realizing Guston's detractors had missed the point, Willem De Kooning, defended him and his much decried pictures, pointing out that they were more than just cartoon clocks and Klansmen riding in convertibles: they were "about freedom."²⁶ Johanna Drucker picks up on this sentiment and begins remapping Greenberg's prescription, arguing for a critical framework based around affirmation and complicity rather than autonomy and negativity, writing, "zones of habitual exclusion are a good place to start: clearly marked as off-limits, evil territory, only to be approached wearing

²⁵ Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture; Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 776.

²⁶ Guston, Philip, Blackwood, Michael, *Saarländischer Rundfunk*, and Blackwood Productions. *Philip Guston, a Life Lived*. New York, N.Y.: Michael Blackwood Productions, 2010.

protective intellectual garb that render the susceptible spirit immune to temptations of so-called bad art...Figurative work, derivative abstraction, spiritually inspired imagery (whether abstract or representative), and the works in a formulaic, illustrational style.”²⁷

Its as though Drucker is conjuring Charlton Heston in *Planet of the Apes*, discovering the artifacts of his decimated Human civilization hidden in the desolate wasteland and crying out, “The Forbidden Zone was once a paradise, your breed made a desert of it...ages ago.”²⁸ I am naturally sympathetic to such a cry, as my work clearly falls into these zones, but art is not a monotheism, and Drucker opens a space where one may burn offerings to Greenberg, Rosenberg or the Pre-Raphaelites in the same image. The reforestation of the forbidden zone of heretic aesthetics is only made richer by the fertilization of modernism’s ashes, and this entropic return and reopening signals new forms on new horizons.

The complicity of Drucker’s formulation has reverberations in de Kooning’s poignant assertion of freedom in art. If the restrictions of purity choked out high modernism, perhaps freedom then could become a new standard to bear. In David Graeber’s book *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, images may or may not be autonomous, but individuals certainly are, by benefit of modes of counterpower rooted in the imaginative life: “In egalitarian societies, which tend to place an enormous emphasis on creating and maintaining communal consensus, this often appears to spark a kind of equally elaborate reaction formation, a spectral nightworld inhabited by

²⁷ Drucker, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams : Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago ; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2005, 7.

²⁸ Heston, Charlton., Boule, Pierre, and Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation. *Planet of the Apes*. Widescreen ed. *Planet of the Apes : the Legacy Collection*. Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006.

monsters, witches, or other creatures of horror.”²⁹ This “spectral nightworld” is understood as preemptive solutions to the real or anticipated violence of the physical observed world. There is always a dark suspicion in my paintings that they are so complicit with the labyrinth of images, that they are not contemplative, but actually escapist. Perhaps they are, some certainly are, image-making has always been the main capacity for me to deal with a reality of horrible permutations—alienation, insomnia, domestic violence, poverty, bullies, broken homes, loaded weapons, cancer, reality television, drug abuse, sexual abuse, animal abuse, homophobia, racism. Reality is really difficult, even when you’re not sad or stressed, you’re probably bored, stuck in traffic, breathing dirty air, with a computer headache. It seems like a strange aim to achieve reality in a painting, film or happening. So maybe, just maybe, the work I’ve been making is not about escape, but about a kind of parallel universe to place the problems of my own contemporary existence. They are receptacles of the negative—of hate, anger, guilt, loneliness, cowardice. It’s cathartic to be sure, but there’s also an aspect that reminds me not to enact the violence evident in the paint marks, somber colors, cut images, and truncated figures occurring in my images. Counterpower and freedom are mutually inclusive. Perhaps that’s why Guston’s paintings are so powerful. It’s as if Guston is attempting to banish Klansmen, tungsten lighting, and skyscrapers to a painted nether region. It could be my aim through these images that I strive to achieve to carve out a personal constellation, phantasmagorical, akin to Graeber’s spectral nightworld, as a quiet plea for a more egalitarian existence with less real or psychological violence.

²⁹ Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Paradigm (Chicago, Ill.) ; 14. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press : Distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2004, 25.

Through the fragmented close up of the biographeme and the quiet fracture of the photographic image reimagined, an unstable and unknowable world is envisioned. This painted, spectral world, mediated through the gestures and sonic atmosphere of punk, hardcore and metal, represent the unease of their own making, disconnected and disembodied. What is taken from my own life and experience is poetically distanced and reinterpreted in order to expand its content beyond the merely autobiographical. Figures who are cut up, fragmented, isolated or completely absent become existential placeholders for viewers experiencing alienation or confusion in a world increasingly confusing and alienating.

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